

9th Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics

You Don't Say: Interpreting Author-intended Inference

Normative dispensationalism stands or falls on its consistent use of “literal” interpretation. According to this system, the reader¹ understands the text in light of what it says and the setting in which it says it. Ryrie’s preferred label for this system is “normal” or plain hermeneutics— “interpretation that does not spiritualize or allegorize.”² The process is simple: the modern reader uses the words and grammar of the passage along with its textual and situational context to identify “the author’s intended meaning as expressed in the text.”³ In other words, the reader understands what the author says in the way he intended it to be understood. But what about the things he does not say, but still intends? What about the things he expects the reader to infer?

Inferences are a normal part of human communication. This is easily demonstrated. For example, consider the following actual exchange that I witnessed during a counseling session⁴:

Judas: “John, don’t you trust me?”

John: “I trust Peter” (a different counselor).

Everyone in the room understood what John intended to communicate. John did not trust Judas. Judas knew it. Peter knew it. I knew it. The interesting thing is that John never actually said it. Rather than directly confronting Judas, he made his point indirectly—by inference. Of course, the

¹This study uses the terms “author” and “reader” to refer to the sender and receiver of a communication respectively— whether that communication is spoken or written, secular or scriptural.

²Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 40.

³Elliot E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie, 1990), 10. ⁴The names have been changed to protect the innocent—and the guilty!

use of inference (or indirect speech) is not limited to awkward situations; even the simplest of statements often require the reader to “fill in the blank.” If someone says that he slept well, we infer that he means “last night.” If he says that he hasn’t eaten, we infer that he means recently. If the doctor tells you that you aren’t going to die, you infer that he means not now and not from the condition he is treating. In situations such as these, we all infer the very same things. The question is how do we do it? Do we use a special “inferential hermeneutic”—one that does not rely on the words and grammar of the text, one whose goal is something other than the author’s intended meaning? For us dispensationalists, answering this question is more than an academic exercise. It is vital to the survival of our entire system because inferences are not only common in conversation; they also pervade Scripture.

The Pragmatics of Inference

To get an unbiased answer, this study turns to the findings of pragmatics the branch of modern linguistics that studies how people communicate using language.⁵ Since inference is a normal part of communication, pragmatics takes a special interest in it—how authors use inferences and how readers understand them. Roughly speaking, pragmatics divides inferences into two types⁶:

⁵This caricature represents a gross oversimplification, but one that captures the issue relevant to this study. The various sub-disciplines of pragmatics and their findings are fairly straightforward; the difficulty is to define the overall system in a way that accounts for all of its aspects. Stephen C. Levinson offers a thorough discussion of this issue. See *Pragmatics*, Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 5-35.

⁶This classification is oversimplified for the sake of clarity. For a more thorough analysis, see Levinson, *Pragmatics* and Kent Bach, “The Top 10 Misconceptions About Implicature” (San Francisco: San Francisco State University, 2005), 3. Available from <http://online.sfsu.edu/kbach/TopTen.pdf> (Accessed September 7, 2016).

implications and implicatures.⁷ An implication is an inference that is not dependent on its context; an implicature is one that is. The two types differ in several ways, but the most obvious is that implicatures can be canceled; implications cannot. To see what this means, consider the inferences associated with each of the following statements:

Joyce is Bob's wife.
 Joyce is Bob's first wife.

In both statements, the author implies that Bob is (or has been) Joyce's husband. In fact, neither statement can be understood in any other way. We can change the context as much as we want, but as long as Joyce remains his wife, Bob will still be her husband. We can attempt to cancel this implication by saying "Joyce is Bob's wife, but he is not her husband," but the result is just gibberish.⁸ In the second statement, however, the author causes us to infer something more. By inserting the adjective "first," he suggests that Bob has been divorced. This inference is an implicature. Nothing in the words or grammar requires this idea; it is suggested by our cultural context. Change that context, and the implicature changes. If the author made his statement in Saudi

⁷H. Paul Grice coined the term "implicature" for use in his Williams James Lectures in 1967. For the text of this lecture, see H. Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *Syntax and Semantics, Vol. III*, eds. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (New York: Academic Press, 1975), 41-58.

⁸Of course, sometimes, authors do use self-contradiction as a rhetorical device. A statement such as "Joyce is Bob's wife, although they've never been married" is sure to catch the reader's attention—specifically because he can make no sense out of it. It is just gibberish until the author explains himself: "After forty-five years, they discovered that the preacher never filed their marriage license with the state." This sort of explanation does not really make sense out of nonsense; it inserts meaning into an otherwise meaningless sentence.

Self-contradictory statements are often used to highlight an idea, as in oxymoron: "The silence was deafening." At other times, their purpose is to entertain, as when the American folk song "O Susannah" asserts that "it rained all night the day I left; the weather it was dry." Such uses do not negate the non-cancelability of implications; they exploit it. For biblical examples of oxymoron, see E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898; reprint ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 816-8.

Arabia, he might well be implicating⁹ that Joyce is the first of Bob's several wives. In neither case, however, is the implicature inescapable. By adding an explanatory phrase, you can cancel it: "Joyce is Bob's first wife—his first and only wife." This new statement may be awkward, but it is clear—and sensible.

Note that in both types of inference, the author totally controls what is communicated. This is particularly obvious in implicature. By saying "Joyce is Bob's first wife," he *obliges* the (monogamous) reader to conclude that Bob has been divorced. If he adds "his first and only wife," however, he *prevents* the reader from drawing that conclusion. Either way, the author is in control. Although the mechanism is different, the author's control is also evident in implication. He exercises that control by his choice of language. By saying "Joyce is Bob's wife," he *requires* the reader to see Bob as Joyce's husband. He could have prevented that implication by choosing to make a slightly different statement: "Joyce is Bob's special lady." This version asserts that Bob and Joyce have a close relationship, but leaves the nature of that relationship ambiguous.¹⁰ Each statement has an associated implication. The difference between them comes from the author's choice of wording. Thus, whether we are dealing with implication or implicature, it is the author, not the reader or the text, that determines what meaning the reader should infer. As Levinson observes, "Communication involves the notion of intention and agency, and only those inferences that we openly intend to be conveyed can properly be said to have been communicated."¹¹ In short, a text can never communicate

⁹"Implicate" is the verb form of "implicature"; it is what the author does to produce an implicature.

¹⁰Of course, the reader may infer from this reworded statement that Bob and Joyce are *not* married, but that inference is an implicature, not an implication.

¹¹Levinson, *Pragmatics*, 15-16.

more or less than what its author intends it to mean. This is so even when that meaning is not explicitly stated.

People encounter both types of inference all the time and understand them without difficulty—usually without consciously thinking about it. Conscious or unconscious, the process they use does not rely on some esoteric or specialized hermeneutic. They simply follow the guidance that the author provides in his text and make the appropriate inferences as needed. Pragmatics has validated this process through detailed analysis of conversation, but its insights can be applied to any sort of literature, including the implications and implicatures found in Scripture.

Implications

Implications in Conversation. As pragmatics has found, implications communicate so well in conversation that most people do not even recognize them as inferences. They just treat them as part of what the text says. Unfortunately, this tendency can be misleading since not every implication is part of the author’s intended meaning, only those that are relevant in the context. Look again at the statement, “Joyce is Bob’s wife.” The implication that Bob is married is always there, but it is not always relevant. Relevance depends on the context, as is shown by placing the statement in two different contexts:

Context 1.

Mary: Who is that woman over there?

John: That woman is Bob’s wife.

Context 2.

Mary: Bob’s so good looking; I wish I could get him away from that woman over there. John:
That woman is Bob’s wife.

In both contexts, John uses the same statement with the same implication, but his intent is different in each. In the first, John is making an identification. His intent is to distinguish “that woman” from every other woman, and calling her “Bob’s wife” is just a convenient way of doing that. Though implied, the fact that Bob is married is incidental to John’s intent. In the second context, however, Bob’s marital status is crucial; it is precisely what John intends to communicate.¹²

Implications in Scripture. Implications are not hard to find in Scripture, and they present few interpretive challenges. In the interest of brevity, therefore, I examine only two here: one incidental to the author’s intent and one central to it. The first example is found in Genesis 22:6:

So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went on together.¹³

The fact that Isaac carried¹⁴ enough wood for a burnt offering implies that he is a young adult, not a child. Any attempt to cancel this inference results in nonsense. There is no context in which this statement can make sense if Isaac is a young child.¹⁵ That being said, everything else in the context suggests that this implication is incidental to author’s point.¹⁶ Throughout the broader passage

¹²The second context also involves an implicature. By identifying Bob as married (implication), Bill implicates that Mary should stay away from him (implicature). Unlike Bill’s implication, however, the implicature can be canceled: “That woman is Bob’s wife. She’s a wonderful woman. You really should meet her.”

¹³Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations in this paper are taken from *The Holy Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1985). The italicized material come from this translation.

¹⁴Technically, the text only states that the wood was placed on Isaac. The idea that he was the one that bore it to the place of sacrifice is an implicature. Though suggested by the context, this idea could have been canceled, for example, by a clarifying clause: “. . . and laid it on Isaac his son to load on another donkey.”

¹⁵So Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 110.

¹⁶Hamilton, *Ibid.*, comments, “If Abraham displayed faith that obeys, then Isaac displays faith that cooperates.” Perhaps, but the focus of the text is on Abraham, and him alone. The author goes out of his way to keep him central. For more

(Genesis 22:1-19), the focus stays on Abraham. It is Abraham that God is testing, Abraham that does all of the work, Abraham that God commends and blesses. Except as a sacrificial victim, Isaac's only substantive contribution is to ask his father a question—a question whose answer shows the depth of *Abraham's* faith.

The second inference is found in Daniel 9:25b-27a:

From the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, *there shall be* seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; . . . And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself: and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it *shall be* with a flood, and till the end of the war desolations are determined. Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week: . . .”

According to verse 26, the Messiah is to be cut off *after* the end of the sixty-ninth week, but *before* the beginning of the seventieth. This implies that there must be an gap of unspecified duration between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy. This idea is not stated in the text, but it is the only implication one can draw from it. After A, but before B can only mean *between* A and B. Though an implication, this gap (into which the church age will later be fitted) is derived from what the text says about Israel's future, not from some dispensationalist presupposition. The LORD declares that all that he has promised will be fulfilled in a period of 490 years, but with a gap between the 483rd and the 484th. Though unstated, this gap matters. Without it, the text makes no sense. Without it, there is no way to reconcile this timetable with the actual events of history.¹⁷ As these examples show, the reader can distinguish a peripheral from a central implication only by considering the author's intent. Otherwise, he's just making up his own text.

on the use of inference in this passage, see page 11 of this study.

¹⁷Even if you consider the gap incidental, you cannot ignore it. As an implication, it is inherent in the text itself.

Implicatures

Implicatures in Conversation. Though unstated, implications are imbedded in what is actually said, implicatures are associated with context, not with specific statements.¹⁸ This difference is difficult to explain, but relatively easy to illustrate. Look back at the second sentence about Bob's wife: "Joyce is Bob's first wife." As previously mentioned, this statement *implies* that Bob is (or has been) married. Though not found in the words and grammar, this implication is a property of the sentence itself. Without it, the sentence makes no sense. That is why an implication cannot be canceled. This statement also *implicates* something: that Bob has been divorced. This idea, however, is not a property of the sentence, but of the context. Change the context, and the implicature associated with it changes ("the first of his many wives") or is canceled ("his first and only wife"). The reader approaches an implication with grammar and logic. With an implicature, however, he applies a general assumption about communication. He assumes that the author has an intended meaning and has provided enough contextual information for the reader to understand it.

Grice calls this assumption the cooperative principle and expounds its function using four maxims. Though he understands them as aspects of the cooperative principle, he presents them in the imperative, as if they were guidelines for an author. For example, he states his maxim of quality as "try to make your contribution one that is true." While useful for authors, these maxims are even more useful as guides for readers. Therefore, rather than quote Grice's maxims verbatim, this study restates them as general principles that the reader uses to discover and validate the idea the author intends to communicate by his implicature. Each will be illustrated using examples from Scripture.

¹⁸For a defense of this statement, see Bach, "Top 10 Misconceptions," 2-4.

Implicatures in Scripture. According to Grice’s first maxim, the maxim of quality, the reader assumes that the author is speaking what he believes to be true on the basis of adequate evidence. Unless he signals that his words should be taken in a different way, the author will be taken at his word.¹⁹ The interpretation of Genesis 1 provides a good example of this maxim at work. Assuming that the author (Moses) says what he means and means what he says, we must conclude that he intends a literal, six-day creation. The only way to escape this conclusion is to find some mark of cancellation. Despite the ingenious efforts of scholars such as Walton,²⁰ no such mark exists. His arguments for a cosmic temple may seem strong, but they ultimately fail—impaled on the maxim of quality. You can argue that Moses was confused; you can argue that he lied; but you cannot argue that he meant to communicate anything but what he said. It is the Bible. Take it or leave it.

Grice’s second maxim is quantity. According to this maxim, the reader expects the author to supply just enough information to make his intent clear— no more and no less. This means that readers will attempt to find significance in every fact and detail of the text. This maxim functions so perfectly in Ruth 4:7-8 that few people even notice that there is an implicature:

Now this *was the custom* in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging, to confirm anything: one man took off his sandal and gave *it* to the other, and this *was* a confirmation in Israel. Therefore the close relative said to Boaz, “Buy *it* for yourself.” So he took off his sandal.

Contrary to most people’s first impression, this passage never says that the close relative gave his sandal to Boaz.—only that he took it sandal off. As far as the text is concerned, he could have thrown

¹⁹Of course, this maxim does not preclude lying. On the contrary, it explains why lying works. Readers can be deceived because their first response is to believe what they are told.

²⁰For a simple statement of his theory, see John H. Walton *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

it away or sent it out to be repaired. In keeping with the maxim of quantity, however, the reader assumes that he did give it to Boaz.²¹ Otherwise, why would the author have bothered to mention the sandal-passing custom at all?²² This implicature is so clear that no one, not even the most severe critic of literal interpretation, understands it any other way. Such unanimity doesn't just happen; it results from the specific information that the author chose to include in his account.

Grice's third maxim is relevance. According to this maxim, readers expect the author's statements to be relevant to the topic at hand. This maxim is most evident when the author says something that appears to be irrelevant, as in the following exchange:

Do you know what time it is?
Well, the *Today* show just came on.

The inquirer requests the time, and the respondent tells him what is on television. Though apparently unrelated, this response makes perfect sense—if the inquirer knows what time the *Today* show airs. Proverbs 15:26 provides a more complex, and more useful, example of an implicature based on relevance:

The thoughts of the wicked *are* an abomination to the LORD But
the words of the pure *are* pleasant.

The contrast between “abomination” and “pure” here is so odd that Toy argues that “the second clause as it stands cannot be original. . . . *pure* (f^h)r) is not a proper contrast to *abomination*

²¹The translator of the Septuagint felt the need for an explicit explanation that he inserted the missing data: *kai. e;dwken autw/|*, “and he gave *it* to him.”

²²Another passage illustrating this maxim is Ezekiel 40-44, where the excessive detail implicates that the prophet is describing an actual, albeit future, temple and rituals. Why go into such detail if the temple is figurative? (If the temple were an allegory, one would expect some hint as to the significance of the details.)

(T)u@B*.”²³ The connection between the two lines does seem a bit awkward, but there is no need to dismiss it as a textual error. Although they never heard of the term, generations of Jewish and Christian readers have understood it as an implicature—the sage replacing the familiar contrasting term (favor) with “pure” to implicate that purity and divine favor go together. Fox puts it simply: “This proverb teaches that not only are pleasant friendly words agreeable and sweet (thus Prov 16:24), they are *pure* (15:26b) and hence are acceptable to God (implied by reversal of v 26a).”²⁴

Grice’s fourth maxim is manner. Readers expect the author to make his statements as clear as they need to be, as succinct and orderly as possible, and not unnecessarily obscure or ambiguous. Though often classified as matters of style, implicatures of manner are not just decorative. They communicate, as shown by the implicatures in Genesis 22. Genesis 22:9-10 describes Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in such detail that it actually impedes the progress of the narrative. As Waltke puts it, “The narrator develops this moment from the view of a slow-motion camera.”²⁵ Waltke is no doubt correct, but the question is why does the author report it this way? Certainly, his original readers did not need the information; they were already familiar with burnt offerings. The author is not using it to inform, but to implicate—to direct the reader “to pay particular attention and care to each of the operations involved.”²⁶ The whole narrative climaxes at

²³C. H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), 315.

²⁴Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible, vol. 18b (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 602. The emphasis is in the text. Where Fox says “implies,” this study would say “implicates.”

²⁵Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 308.

²⁶Levinson, *Pragmatics*, 108.

this point, and the author wants the reader to note how completely Abraham performs his painful duty.²⁷ Earlier in the account (22:4), he telescopes three days of travel into one phrase: “on the third day.” The implicature makes the author’s perspective clear. What Abraham did over the three days from Beersheba to Moriah does not matter, but what he did in one afternoon on the mountain does.

Floutings

As the preceding discussion shows, abiding by the cooperative principle and its maxims allows an author to guide his reader to the implicated ideas he intends. Authors, however, do not always abide by the maxims. Sometimes, they use implicatures that “come about by overtly and blatantly *not* following some maxim.”²⁸ Implicatures of this type are called “floutings.” The use of floutings demonstrates two essential facts about communication. First, it shows how robust the cooperative principle is. Faced with what could be dismissed as nonsense, the reader’s first response is to try to make sense of it. Second, it shows how crucial the author’s intent is in communication. The reader can only make sense of a flouting by assuming that the author intended it and intended to make a point by it. Apart from this assumption, interpretation is impossible. Thus, in floutings, as in all other aspects of inference, it is the author that delimits and defines the meaning of a text. Levinson puts it more academically: “By overtly infringing some maxim, the speaker can *force* the hearer to do extensive inferencing to some set of propositions, such that if the speaker can be

²⁷In a similar way, Exodus 35-39 reports the building of the tabernacle in great detail, using almost the same words as in the original instructions (Exodus 25-31). Here again, the implicature is to draw attention to how completely Israel obeyed the LORD.

²⁸Levinson, *Pragmatics*, 109. The emphasis is Levinson’s.

assumed to be conveying these then at least the over-arching co-operative principle would be sustained.”²⁹

Perhaps the most obvious type of flouting is irony. Irony violates the maxim of quality. Instead of speaking what he knows to be true, the author says what he knows to be untrue—and yet does not lie. The mechanics of lying and irony are identical: the author says something he knows is not true. In lying, his intent is to deceive the reader, to convince him that the untruth is true. In irony, however, his intent is the exact opposite: to show what is true by flagrantly misrepresenting it.

Normal language is rife with irony: tall men called “Shorty,” thin men called “Fats,” buck privates called “General.” Logically, such contradictions should confuse the reader, but in daily life, they are almost never misunderstood. Readers simply assume that the author is making sense and look past what he says to discover what he intends. As Levinson observes, “If there was no underlying assumption of co-operation, recipients of ironies ought simply to be nonplussed; no inferences could be drawn.”³⁰ An ironic statement is so obviously false that the only way to make sense of it is to assume that the author means the opposite of what he says.

Irony also occurs in Scripture. One of the clearest examples is in 1 Corinthians 4:8: “You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us— and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you!” Here, Paul is using sarcasm (a form of irony). He is not really commending them for their progress; to the contrary, he is shaming them for their lack of it—as the broader context reveals. Here, as elsewhere, readers only make sense of the

²⁹Ibid., 109. The emphasis is added.

³⁰Ibid.

text by looking for the author's intention. Otherwise, they could never perceive any meaning in irony.

A Parting Caveat

Implications and implicatures are common in conversation and in Scripture. Understanding them requires no specialized hermeneutic; the reader simply follows the author's guidelines to discover his intended meaning. Although this usually presents no difficulty, the concept of inference can be abused. Two abuses are rather common and thus worthy of comment. First, a reader can think that the idea he is inferring comes from the text when it really comes from his own presuppositions. This is what happened in midrashic interpretation,³¹ the approach used by the rabbis in the time of Christ and the apostles. Midrash shares two assumptions with evangelicalism: that the Bible is inerrant and that its wording is relevant.³² As sound as these assumptions are, they did not protect the rabbis from error because instead of letting the text speak for itself, they began with what they "knew" the text should mean. Then, applying the principles of inerrancy and relevance to *that* meaning, they "inferred" specific applications of it. The midrashic era in Judaism ended centuries ago, but this approach to interpretation persists—even among dispensationalists. Beware of using inference as a cover for eisegesis.

Second, a reader can genuinely infer more from a text than what the author actually intended. For example, if Charlie says, "Bob made a mess of things—as usual," he obviously intends the reader to consider Bob inept. He does not say that, but his intention is clear. The reader, however,

³¹For a thorough introduction to midrashic interpretation, see Alexander Samely, "Scripture's Implicature: The Midrashic Assumptions of Relevance and Consistency," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 37 (1992): 167-205.

³²Ibid., 170.

can also infer something else, something that Charlie did not intend; he may properly conclude that Charlie looks down on Bob. This conclusion is probably accurate, but it comes from the reader's mind, not Charlie's. To reach it, the reader must abandon his role as reader and become his own author. Such inferences may make for creative homiletics, but they produce bad exegesis—even if the inference is accurate. Though not uncommon, abuses such as these are not benign. When it comes to his word, the LORD himself warns “not add to it nor take away from it” (Deut. 12:32 [Heb. 13:1]). Mya we all be good stewards of this responsibility.